10: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1945 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

In the early 1900's many Karens who had cleared immense tracts of land raised large crops of paddy and became well-to-do. It was then that they employed many Burman and Indian coolies to work for them. They built substantial houses, often of teak, or in a few instances of brick. Some of them were able to add field to field and became really wealthy. It was at this time that money-lenders became very active and going about the villages imposed loans of easy money on the unsuspecting cultivators. These loans were then allowed to lie idle for a year or two until the interest, set at exorbitant rates, mounted to nearly double the original loans, when a sudden demand for full payment could not be met ; and the results were that the lending sharks foreclosed on the rich paddy-fields. In this way many a Karen who was once a prosperous cultivator became a tenant on land that he had previously owned. This process continued until near the time of the invasion and the property, land, houses and cattle of the Karens as well as of Burman cultivators, were largely in the hands of absentee landlords. The Indian Tamil Chettiars were the most numerous class of money-lenders and most exacting in demanding their pounds of flesh.

In only a few cases have the Karens proved to be good traders. They are too soft-hearted and often sell on credit which they feel embarrassed to collect, and therefore they soon fail. The shops in the Karen villages in the hills are most often kept by the Shans who are born traders. On the plains the Chinese have found the Karen villages good places to make money. They begin in a small way and soon, by lending money, collecting their debts by foreclosing on the land, and sometimes by selling

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opium on the quiet, grow rich at the expense of their neighbours. They usually come to Burma single but they can easily marry, for their prosperity attracts the young women, and then they settle down to raise a family of mixed blood, and make a real contribution to the life of the country.

The Karens are at home in the forests. In many cases they became expert foresters for the Government and for the timber firms. Where the use of elephants was needed they were largely employed. There were at the time of the invasion a number of Karen timber contractors owning elephants which they understood and knew how to catch and train and use in hauling logs from the jungles to the river banks where in the rains the swelling streams carried them down to the markets at Moulmein and Rangoon.

The Karens have established a safe way of training newly-caught elephants for timber use. Instead of the more cruel methods of jabbing and brow-beating often used by Indian elephant drivers, they tie the animals up to the large trees left near the point of the V-shaped corral that they build along the elephant runs in the jungle, and then they keep the animals from sleeping by continually feeding and working with them for five or more days, until they subdue their wild spirit and win them to obedience to their keepers. Thus in six months they can train a full-grown animal to follow the directions of its keeper and drag out logs.

From the first contacts with the "Younger White Brother" their desire to read the Book which he brought them was very keen. In the beginning men and some women of all ages went to school to be able to read the

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243 442 In these days it is the usual practice to sell the grain to the traders directly from the threshing-floor. Sometimes it is stored for a few months in the hope of an advance in price, but most of the smaller cultivators are compelled by their poverty to sell at once. The buyers may be Burmans, but in these later years are more often Chinese. A few Karens have done some trading in paddy, although they are generally not so successful as the traders of the other nationalities.

343 The grain kept for family use is stored in bins of bamboo made in the shape of great baskets or "weh." These "weh" vary in size from those having double the diameter of a bushel-basket up to the huge ones of ten or twelve feet in diameter and of equal height. They are set upon platforms several feet above the ground and adjoining or close to the house. The planks forming the bottom are firmly secured together and coated with cow-dung. After a bin has been filled, the top is covered with a layer of straw, well packed in, and a thick coating of cow-dung is spread over it to seal the grain.

421 435 It is not my purpose in this work to enter into a detailed economic study of Karen agriculture. Here I have but a few observations to offer. Under the conditions obtaining just before the World War, the economic outlook for the Karen cultivator was none too good. The Karen people are no more provident than the Burmese. At the beginning of the season they borrow money, for which they must pay one hundred baskets of paddy for fifty rupees of money.[1] If they have no oxen of buffaloes of their own they must hire them, paying from fifty to sixty rupees a yoke for the former and ten rupees additional each for the latter. To hire a man to work in the rainy season and to plow costs about the same as paying for the use of a team of oxen. If he is employed until the threshing is finished, he costs another fifty rupees. The yield per acre varies all the way from twenty-five to seventy baskets, according to the quality of the land and whether a little manure has been used or not. For many years the price of paddy remained close to one hundred rupees for one hundred baskets, being sometimes a little below and at others a few rupees above that price. Before the war competition and speculation had forced the price up gradually, until it reached a maximum of one hundred and thirty-five rupees.

[1] The size of baskets varies in different districts, ranging in capacity from forty to sixty pounds. Those having a capacity of forty-six pounds are now considered to be of standard size. As the price varies inversely with the size, the result is about the same.

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No one can presume to predict the outcome of the present unsettled conditions. We can only hope that better days are in store for the cultivators, whether Burman or Karen.

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If, before the war, a man owned his field and cattle without encumberance or other debts, he could till some twenty acres and make a comfortable living for himself and family. If, however, he was under the necessity of borrowing money and hiring men and cattle, he could hardly keep his head above water.

241 427

There are some Karens who own large fields. They may have acquired them by careful management, by purchase, or by foreclosing loans. Many of these proprietors make a business of hiring out their fields to men who cultivate them at a rental of from ten to fifteen baskets of paddy per acre, the cultivator supplying his own materials and help. In case the owner has oxen, he rents them at the usual price. In addition, he usually makes a loan of cash to his tenant, on which he gets a big return, namely, a hundred baskets of paddy for the sum of fifty rupees for six months. If the tenant borrows from a money-lender, he has to pay anywhere from fifteen to fifty percent a year for it.

243 312

On the plains the cultivator is almost entirely dependent on his single crop of paddy. If high water has washed out his first settings, there is not time enough left to raise other produce after the water has disappeared. Under these circumstances they sometimes plant sesame, but it requires only a little less time to mature than paddy. The lack of water in the dry season renders cultivation impossible without extensive irrigation.

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Along the river-bottoms may be found a few plantain groves, patches of tobacco, sugar-cane, or vegetables; but these are unusual sights. They may add a little to the cultivator's income. But very few persons derive their chief support from such gardens.

243 241 177

The Karen on the plains do not observe the old religious customs of the hill people. Many times they resort to Burmese soothsayers to prognosticate the proper times for planting, reaping, and other tasks. Not a few, however, follow the old ceremonies in greater or less part. A ceremonial similar to "theh a hkü" in the hills [1] is observed on the plains where it is designated "mo a si." It is performed when the paddy is set out. Offerings are seldom seen along the paths in this region, but when the paddy has been winnowed an offering is made to "Hpi Bi Yaw" by transferring the rim of earth around a crab's burrow to the summit of the pile of

[1] See ante, pp. 78, 79.